

#201 JOHN LATKO: USS *WEST VIRGINIA*

John Martini (JM): Okay, today is December the fourth, 1991. This is an oral history interview with Mr. John Latko. On December 7, 1941, Mr. Latko was a Marine private serving aboard the battleship USS *WEST VIRGINIA*. He was twenty-two years old at the time. Today we are doing this oral history tape as a co-project between the USS *ARIZONA* Memorial, National Park Service, and television station, KHET in Honolulu. My name is John Martini.

And Mr. Latko, thank you for coming. The first question I generally ask is how did you get into the Navy?

John Latko (JL): I was in the Marine Corps.

JM: Oh! I forgot.

JL: Marine detachment.

JM: Marine corps.

JL: Well, I wanted to get in my one year into the military and get it over with. As you recall, at that time, they had the song, "Good-bye dear, I'll be back in a year," and I figured, hey, I can get in and get my one year in -- my draft number was quite large. I think they went up to 800 and I was somewhere around 500 or 600. And I said, "Hey, I don't want to wait that long," and I wanted to enlist in the Marine Corps if I was going to do anything.

So I had my teeth fixed up, my tonsil pulled. Hey, I wanted to get good physical condition and sure enough, they took me. I was up in Chicago in the medical examinations, and the Navy said, "Hey, come join us," and, "we need you guys too."

And so I says, "No."

So that day I got examined and we took oath and the officer that says, "You're in the Marine Corps now. You better be on that train at ten o'clock or you're A-W-O-L."

And so we went to San Diego and I did boot camp training and I was in the sixteenth, what they call the sixteenth training group. And so, after the seven weeks, I would be going to a casual company and I didn't kind of want the casual company. I wanted to go to Corpus Christi, Texas to do duty there at the Naval Station. Nothing was open and then I seen master gunner Sergeant Martinez, with hash marks all the way down from his elbow and hey, he was really a nice sergeant. And with the saber and hat, he was really snappy. And I said, "Well, hey, maybe I can be a Marine that way."

So I went to sea school, and then I says, "Hey, I don't think I like sea school."

It was nice, and I asked for a transfer and the sergeant, Martinez, said, "Well, if you do, we're going to have to stamp on your record book, 'unfit for sea duty afloat.'"

And I said, "I don't want none of that."

So I stayed on and then after graduating there after three weeks, why, then a group of us, we were allowed to pick ships, and so we picked the *WEST VIRGINIA*, the "WEEVEE".

JM: Can I ask, so they actually did let you pick which ship you were going to go for?

JL: Yeah. Those that wanted to because there were groups, they had had so many, say, six or seven go on this ship, so many onto the aircraft carrier, so many on the battleship, and so many on the cruiser. So me and the other fellows from boot camp, we says, "Hey, we'll take the *WEST VIRGINIA*," and sure enough, we got it. And we went and left San Diego on Memorial Day, May 30, and arrived in Honolulu aboard the *WHARTON* [(AP-7)], the Navy transport. That would have been June sixth or seventh.

JM: Nineteen . . .

JL: Forty-one. And six months later came Pearl Harbor.

JM: And was there a reason that you chose the *WEST VIRGINIA*, specifically. Was it her or just a battleship, or what was your . . .

JL: It was just the battleship and it was that, I think it would have, they needed about five or six fellows that had time and we were kind of sticking together. There was no particular reason, it was just that we thought we'd be together, buddies.

JM: How did you like being in Hawaii at that time?

JL: It was nice. It was just like San Diego. It wasn't a serviceman's island, it was a serviceman's community and there was no war or nothing and you weren't looked as an individual, as an enterprising individual. You were just a serviceman and your dollar was worth something, but you weren't. And it was the same thing all the time, until the war came and then, well, then you were sort of looked up to. And I imagine every serviceman feels that sometimes throughout his career in peacetime.

JM: So what kind of duties did your Marine detachment have aboard *WEST VIRGINIA*?

JL: Well, we were, our primary purpose, I believe, was -- all the Marines know this -- in event of a landing, that we form a spearhead and do the methods. Going on, you probably heard the songs, in the Marine Corps hymn, "From the shores of Tripoli to Montezuma," and you do the landings and then you establish a beachhead. And then the other services come in.

But now I think that's all changed, the way they've manipulated the services, what they're going to do. So --- and then I think they formed the Fleet Marine Forces.

JM: What about battle stations aboard . . .

JL: My battle station was casemate ten. It was a five-inch gun on the port side. And so that was my primary duty out at sea.

JM: What position on the gun crew?

JL: I was the one that was responsible after the firing of the last shell, before the shell was put in and the powder put in afterward, I was the one that would holler, "Bore clear or else."

I had to see that there were no fragments of the previous explosion, that there was no fire or nothing. Any of the silt left, it was my job to . . .

JM: Yeah . . .

JL: . . . shove 'em aside, take the ramrod, full of water, fill it -- we'd dab, we'd have a bucket of water -- and ram it through, and then let them fire through. Otherwise, they would have caused a catastrophe. And then, when we'd practice, the gunnery sergeant, he would slightly drop, take a little rag or something to make sure I seen it. Or if I didn't see it, I was in trouble, so I guess I was qualified or good enough to pick that out and so that was part of the safety. And every job was important on there, from the ammunition handlers to those that had the aiming of the . . .

JM: Cranking.

JL: . . . yeah, cranking, the vertical and horizontal.

JM: So, well, before December 7, when did you come back into port and tie up?

JL: I think it was sometime before Thanksgiving. It was Thanksgiving and we used to go out, I think, for about ten days and one group of ships would go out, and then another group would go out while we came in. And I remember Thanksgiving, I had the mess duty because we had mess duty two months at a time. And I recall making a comment when I seen all the ships, and I says, "Boy, what are all the battleships doing in the harbor?" And I'd never seen that before. Because we -- it was always just half of us there. And sure enough, we were there.

And I recall on the bulletin board, the commander, he would write up the orders of the day -- and the exec officer was the commander. And he, on there, he had picked up something from the newspaper or the wire, or something that some, maybe military man or Navy personnel had said, "Ship for ship, we can sink the Japanese navy in about an hour and a half."

And I remember that, always. I says, right after the happening and it brought to mind, I says, now, "Hour and a half, we're the ones that are sunk."

But of course, I guess they meant out in the open, out at sea, where they would engage in combat with long range guns and airplanes.

JM: Do you remember how you spent the night of December sixth?

JL: Yeah, it was a regular night. We were nothing exceptional. We were going on a picnic at the Naval ammunition dump that the Marines were doing guard duty at. And the previous week, the starboard side had a picnic there and this week, we were going. So we were looking forward to it because I had been there, oh, a couple months earlier and we had a nice time and I was

looking forward to drinking beer, playing baseball, pitching horseshoes, having a good old time. But that was good.

And we had -- the cooks had brought up the food for us, because we had to furnish our own food. Navy personnel, I guess, or any service personnel, I guess, you have to be responsible for your own food. So there was, I guess, about fifty or sixty of us going, so we had to make sure that we had enough food. So we were out on the quarterdeck and the Marines that had the duty, they were on the quarterdeck and were kind of jiving with them. And they sounded prep call. As you know, that's five minutes before colors.

JM: That's on the morning of the seventh?

JL: Morning. About two, three minutes -- I would say about, somewhere within about two minutes or so, while we were up there, while we were on the quarter deck. We were looking up in the sky and there were bombs. There were planes flying down, like if they were -- well, not like, if they were, and we assumed that they were doing target practice because out at sea, we had pulled the target, behind us probably, maybe a hundred yards or so, and the planes would dive bomb at it and practice dive bombing. And we watched them and we says, "Hey, what kind of emblems are those?"

You know, we couldn't understand why are they doing this on a Sunday? That's the first time. And then, in port. I mean, we didn't realize and we discussed this among ourselves, which in the few seconds that we had. And then, across the bay, we seen a ship afire, smoking. So the officer of the day was on the quarterdeck also, and he had the bugler sound fire and rescue.

JM: Had you heard any explosions or anything by this time?

JL: I don't know if we heard 'em or not. We didn't know if the explosions had come from the ship across the bay, because we seen the smoke there. And of course, all of this happened within about two minutes for us. And then, when they sounded the fire and rescue, we were getting ready. And then, we were going to drop what we had. We were going to go up to our casemates and get ready and whatever we had to do. And then, there was a call, belayed that call. And then, shortly, a few seconds after that, then we heard the familiar, "Da-da-da-da-da-da-da-da," that was the general quarters.

So we wanted to know what was going on. Well, and then we found out, when we got to our casemates, then we could hear our ship shudder and we were taking torpedoes. We could hear additional bombs and whatnot. And we were --- I was facing the *TENNESSEE*, and so our gun crews facing Honolulu, they were able to bring up their powder and we already had six shells for, I think, for about -- not the thick shells, the shells that could be used in the five-inchers, had them ready. All we had to do is bring up the ammunition.

And so we were firing at the torpedo planes and some landed short of Honolulu. So that's where some of the bombs, shelling that had happened, had come from some of the ships that were firing, which was -- they tried to get anything they could. And some got hit and some didn't.

JM: Were these anti-aircraft shells, or just regular . . .

JL: Those were regular five-inch shells that you would use broadside against another ship.

JM: And you were trying to knock down airplanes with that?

JL: That's right. You tried everything when you're in this position, you're not going to say, "Hey, that's not an anti-aircraft gun," so they fired what they -- you would throw rocks. If you had rocks, we would throw rocks at 'em.

JM: Okay. One guy was throwing wrenches out of his tool kit.

JL: Yeah. (Laughs)

JM: Can you go into a little bit? The *WEST VIRGINIA* took seven torpedoes, more than any other battleship.

JL: Six or seven, I think. I've heard seven and I've heard six.

JM: What did that feel like? I mean, you've got that monster amount of armor belt and everything else. Did it muffle it? Was there a big crump, or what?

JL: Well, it was taken from the side where the water was at. We were on the opposite side, and I think there's about 106 feet long. And we had blisters put on, they were put on before I got on. And they were on top of the additional, the armor, the sixteen-inch plate. And they were, I'd say about, maybe, four feet wide and this was used to carry additional fuel oil. And so we had the fuel oil. So it would go through, not only the one-inch plate, but then it also went through the armor -- whether it went through the armor, or below the armor, we have no -- I don't have any idea at all. And of course, when the ship started sinking, then it would probably get up just above that armor plate, you see. And then it was going to start going, well then, even no matter where it was, you were up -- well, the water, the ship was down below where the torpedo can get into, probably, the second deck. And once it got in there, I'm sure that it caused a lot of damage.

JM: While you were taking these torpedo hits, did you know yet who was attacking you? Or anything?

JL: It didn't dawn on us. Until somebody says, "Hey, those are Japanese planes," you know.

They -- those were when we said, "General Quarters," well, the only thing we can think of then were the Japanese, because there was so much talk about what was going on between the Japanese and our country.

JM: So a pretty good inkling.

JL: Yeah. We, because --- when they said, "Hey, we can sink the Japanese navy within an hour and a half," why, that's, you know, you have this. And of course, we read the paper and this was going back and forth, and we had the Honolulu paper and we'd read it, you know. And we had a good inkling. We --- that's when we figured we're going to fight anyway. And that's why we were out in a darkened ship, when I got aboard ship, and that was six months before Pearl Harbor. We already were practicing darkened ship at night, so you sail in the darkness, in complete darkness.

JM: So you were on the side of the ship, with your gun facing away from where all the action . . .

JL: Yeah, we were facing the *TENNESSEE*. That was our sister ship.

JM: Did you feel frustrated or have anything else to do?

JL: Oh. Well, run through my mind, yeah, because I recall hanging up. We had --- we would put our table that we had, the mess tables. We had to keep them somewhere, so they sort of had like a long bar across, and they would kind of swing. And you would swing your tables, you would raise 'em up, put 'em up and that's where your tables were. This way, during the day, you had complete use of the deck. When you were going to eat, you took them down and leave it up when you were going to sleep. In the evening, and after you eat, well, you put 'em back up there. And I recall, because of the ship was leaning, because we were leaning back to the starboard side, why, some of those tables [started] falling. And of course, they were on the deck too and I recall hanging up, just like the five-inch, just holding my hands up there, and they're falling. And many things flashed through my mind. One of 'em was that, what's my mother going to say if I'm killed? That was my biggest concern.

Things flashed through my mind when I was three and four years old, when I didn't think of it before. Hey, I used to rock on my mother's rocker. It was sort of like a large rocker and I used to like to rock and start from the middle of the room, and go up toward the window. Hey, I would keep going with the rocker. You would keep on moving.

I recall, things flashed through my mind when my mother was knitting. In those days, women used to knit and crochet. I'd play around the floor up there and look at her and watch her knit. And those things flashed through my mind.

JM: Totally unrelated to what was going on.

JL: Well, those things flashed through my mind. Why they flashed, I don't know. But this, plus the fright, the anxiety. Hey, you can't do nothing. You can't fire, you can't fight. There's nothing you can do. This is your battle station, that's where you have to stay. You can't fire your weapons 'cause you're enclosed, sort of. Because you're facing the *TENNESSEE*, the same thing as those fellows on the *TENNESSEE* couldn't fire because they would be firing at us. You see? And we did fire anti-aircraft gun to the --- they did get some ammunition from down below. However, they got it up and they did fire some anti-aircraft.

JM: When the *WEST VIRGINIA*, when she really started to keel . . .

JL: It started to keel and it started going because when it was --- well, yes. It was back in the --- hey, you can almost feel yourself. Hey, you're leaning against -- or not leaning against -- well, you're almost laying against the bulkhead. Not the water, we called it the bulkhead. And it was going that way, and then finally somehow it started to settle down. Come to find out later when we were abandoning ship the first time, come to find out that there was an officer's mess man, a sailor, that he was going to cut the hawsers, and that's what happened to the *OKLAHOMA*. They cut the hawsers and then she turned. We were tied up to *TENNESSEE*, so this big Texan here, come to find

out, this big Texan, about six-two, he come up there and I understand he whacked the ones or knocked them out and kept him from cutting those hawsers and we could have gone over. In the meantime, they went down below and opened up the seacocks, and we settled down for the bottom.

JM: They counter flooded?

JL: Yeah. So we would have lost a whole lot more men.

JM: Do you know what they counter flooded, what areas of the ship? Were there men in those compartments?

JL: Well, yeah. In General Quarters, you seal off every part of the ship. You have all your compartments there locked.

JM: I see.

JL: Because you want to be seaworthy. In case one part of the ship is hit, hey, too bad, this part of the ship doesn't go. You see, you make it a watertight compartment. So if we did lose men down there, for that reason, I don't know. But I do know that the brig was hit -- it was down below -- because partly, when I was on duty, I would have the brig watch down there and so I knew just where it was at, and that's where it was hit. And we had couple of fellows in the brig.

And this fellow, his name was Larson, I believe, at the time. He stepped out, he come out, so we were forcing it, not to lose any Marines from my detachment. Otherwise, we would have lost him. If he stayed on down below, he would have got caught. Whether they later says, "Hey, come on up," or what happened, the ship was sinking, and I don't know how they got out.

JM: The guys that were in the brig, did they get out?

JL: I understand that they did and we have a couple of fellows in the brig. And I understand that they didn't. That the fellow come up, from what I understand, no, he didn't, they didn't get out.

JM: So the ship's now settling in the mud, you know, your gun's about to go underwater, seeing the picture.

JL: Almost yeah.

JM: What did you do?

JL: Well, we were, you know, the *ARIZONA* blew up and then we started smoking. Not --- well, smoking, and then flames were coming over. We were afire. And then we were ordered to abandon ship.

JM: You were totally engulfed in flames there.

JL: Yeah. We were, yeah, we were being engulfed. It was coming in. Not at the beginning, the first time we weren't. We were going, we were asked to abandon ship, so we went, I went to the *TENNESSEE*, and they had a . . .

JM: How'd you get over to the *TENNESSEE*?

JL: Well, we were down lower, as we had already hit the bottom, and the fellows from the *TENNESSEE*, they had, as you know, they have what they call these here big ropes, they call 'em bumpers, in between to kind of keep the ships from hitting each other. And so oil was already spreading out from the, wherever, from our bunkers, or from where -- and, not the bunkers, but from the tanks. Well, I call 'em bunkers. And so trying to get up, because we were down lower, the *TENNESSEE* was still up there. She wasn't sinking. Then, there was oil on the ship, and I can see a -- I never could find that hawser in school, that you would climb up in a gym? But that day, this was oily, so I climbed that up, even with the oil. And you know how hard you gotta grip. That's just like trying to hold onto a greased pig. So you can see what you can do when there's anxiety, or when they're fright, or when there's anger, danger, whatever you want to call it.

And then, as we were pulling up, then I can see these here powder cans that we had this unfixed ammunition, which the powder was in these cans. And as they were firing away, from up above, or wherever it was coming from, they were dropping the cans down below, and I can see those cans hitting some of the fellows on the head, on the shoulder. Hey, the fellows would go down, never seen 'em come up anymore.

So but I was fortunate enough to not get hit when I come up, and then, hey, while we were there, another wave of planes come in. They said, "Hey, everybody take cover."

And I remember, I believe that they called it a paint locker. There was a locker, anyway, where they kept here to clean the decks. And I went in there with two other young Marines, they were brothers. Hey, and we stayed there, I don't know how long. I don't recall. Five minutes, ten minutes, fifteen minutes. And they said, "All clear again," so we come out. Come out there to, you know, survey what was going on.

And then I heard, "All *WEST VIRGINIA* Marine, service personnel, come back to your ship, fight fires and help the wounded."

So I went back again and then we were helping carry out some of the fellows and then I found some sheets up on the ammunition hoist that was up there, was up in case mate one, I think, that was up there. Hey, I started carrying it out to, you know, help the fellows. And in fact, well, as I come out the first time, carrying out, and he says, "Hey, duck for cover. Here comes the planes again."

So I hid under with some of the other fellows, under turret number two. That was a sixteen-inch gun and Jap planes came by and you can just see the bullets, you know, going. I guess they were two by two. And as they hit the teakwood, they would just splinter it. You --- probably the same way as you've seen done in the movies.

And so that was it. And that was -- and then again, I've seen it later, when I was on the whaleboat, where they come flying again. And of course, we had a good coxswain on the whale boat and when you see them coming up ahead, he kind of swerved around just in time enough so that the plane couldn't do that that fast. So we might have got hit again that way.

JM: Yeah, you got from your ship onto a whaleboat, didn't you?

JL: I got on there -- this is towards the end, when the flames were coming in and they had taken off some of the wounded. And then, I was going back and another whaleboat came by and I was going back. And they said, "Hey, come on. Let's go. This is the last trip I'm making."

I says, "No, there's still some more wounded in there. And I gotta get some more sheets in there, you know, to help the wounded."

I guess the service personnel were from the office quarters, or where they had the linen. They had brought 'em somehow and got 'em so far. How they got there, I don't know. But, I started taking them up there and I seen this whale boat pulling away. And I seen the smoke and flames, they're coming up and racing by. So I says, "Heck, there ain't nobody here. I'm the last one. I'm getting off." So . . .

JM: So you had an option to get off, because it was the last whaleboat, and you elected to stay behind?

JL: I said, no, I said, "I'm going back out to help these guys." I says, "Well, I'll help out."

But then when I seen, there was nobody there and then I couldn't get back into the case mate, in that first case mate, because the fire and flames had already come that far, so I couldn't go there. When I was talking to them, I figured I could go, but then when I didn't get there, it was, I couldn't get there any more. So therefore, I hollered back at 'em and they kind of stopped and I took the biggest broad jump I ever took. I don't know if I ever did one that good in school, but I flopped, fell in there. And that's when I left the second time.

JM: In fact, I should point out that you were in that famous picture of the whale boat dock, off the *WEST VIRGINIA*. You're in the denims in the bow, around the port bow.

JL: So then when we pulled away from there, they wanted to rescue some more of the fellows in there, as we pulled away from the bow of the *WEST VIRGINIA*, then we went sort of mid-ship of the *WEST VIRGINIA* and that was about, oh, just about where the mainmast was at, the center part of the ship.

And so there was servicemen, the sailors. I couldn't tell because I could just see up above here, what they were. So when I was taken, when I was thrown the hawser, and they called the hawser, they had 'em, I guess, they would pull the boats up with 'em anyway, I guess, whatever they were. Hey, I took a hawser and I threw it out to this one sailor, and I got 'em aboard and that's when I noticed, about twenty-five years later, I seen a picture in the "Look" magazine, and I says, "Hey, that's me. That's that Marine in there," and throwing a line to this fellow.

So that's how I happened to find that and I had that enlarged, and I think I told you about that.

And then I tried to --- right after we got this fellow aboard, closer to the *WEST VIRGINIA* to the fire and flame, there was another serviceman there and

wanted to throw him a line. But the Ensign, or whether it was Ensign or Lieutenant JG.[*Junior Grade*], he says, "No, we can't get that close. We may catch afire ourselves."

And I -- you can just see the fellow's face, "Hey, help me." It's a look. You probably --- I don't know just how to explain it, but it's a look. "Hey, look, save me," and this fellow says no and he was in charge of the whaleboat, and he can just go back. He had his reasons, why I don't know. But I couldn't throw him that line there.

And then I seen the fellows up on the *WEST VIRGINIA*, also up on the mainmast up there, and they were engulfed in smoke and flames. And I was trying to figure out how they were going to get down. And then I seen they had the line thrown in between the *WEST VIRGINIA* and the *TENNESSEE*, and I think they climbed. They must have got off, you know, that way, not coming down through the smoke and flames.

JM: We've only got about two minutes left and you were right in the -- the term we often use -- you were in the belly of the beast, in the middle of everything that was going on.

JL: Yeah.

JM: Fifty years later, you were twenty-two then and this is for the history files. Someone also said this was not a battle of machines. This was people. What would you --- what struck you most that day, as a twenty-two year old? What's your most memorable image?

JL: Well, from that, as I say, fright, fright and that fright. And it was, you kind of forget about yourself and then, you do this, and then from there it was anger. Because after we were put ashore, I don't think it was dock ten. It was dock ten-ten, it was on the other side. I think it was still dock ten-ten. I can't recall, but I'm assuming. I think it was still dock ten-ten. And we were full of oil and everything. And then, the Marines, we were told to go up to the Marine barracks there and get some clean clothes and we did go there. We showered up and the court that was there, or the corporal sergeant that was there, and he says, "Take any clothes you want," when we got cleaned up, and he says, "take any rifle."

Then we were in anger and I think I would have shot -- and it's unfortunate that way, but you would want to shoot an innocent Japanese, whether he was guilty of it or not. But you see, you have this, you're fighting Japan. And whether -- same thing if it would be Germany or Finland, Poland, England, you're not fighting the country, you're fighting everyone that represents that. And it's unfortunate that way, and that's just the way I felt.

JM: Last question quickly. Is the anger still there? How do you feel today?

JL: Let's see. Time heals everything. That's the way I look at it. And in time, I mean, how long can you hold your anger? You gonna die with it? I don't want to die with it. Let's say that we did the opposite. Did they forgive us about Hiroshima? Did they forgive us about Hiroshima? I think we should forgive them. Not that -- and I think it saves lives on both sides.

JM: Thank you.

JL: Thank you. I'm glad to be back here for a while.

JM: All right.

JL: I'm heading back.

END OF INTERVIEW